

## A man, a mouse and an imagination

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People of all ages around the world have been touched by Walt Disney. Whether you watched his productions as a child or have enjoyed them with your own children, his classics have kept open the doors of make-believe.

The father of Mickey Mouse, Walter Elias Disney pioneered cartoon films and his name is synonymous with classic children's movies. An extraordinarily innovative animator and showman, Disney (with his team) received more than 950 honours and citations globally, including 48 Academy Awards and seven Emmys in a Hollywood career that spanned 43 years.

Born on the 5th of December 1901 in Chicago to Irish-Canadian Elias Disney and German-American Flora Call Disney, Walt was one of five children. He was a hard worker from a young age and at seven years old, having discovered his artistic talent, was selling drawings and paintings to friends and family in Missouri where he grew up. By the age of 10 his uncle, a train engineer, roped him in to sell snacks and newspapers along the railroad in Kansas City where he now lived. The newspaper shift was not easy for a kid that age – with his brother Roy, Disney was up by 4:30 every morning to do the round before school. It's no wonder that he was sometimes remonstrated for falling asleep or doodling in class! But he stuck it out for six years to help his family make ends meet.

**“All our dreams can come true, if we have the courage to pursue them.”**

During high school, back in Chicago, Disney continued his artistic pursuits and submitted cartoons to the school paper while taking illustration classes at night at the Chicago Academy of Fine Arts. A patriotic boy, he dropped out of school at 16 to do his bit for the army but as the minimum age was 17, he was turned away. Undeterred, he applied at the Red Cross with a forged birth certificate and was sent to France where he spent a year as an ambulance driver. He continued with his art during this time, contributing to the army newspaper and using the sides of the ambulance as a canvas for his cartoons!

When Disney moved back to Kansas City in 1919, he secured a job with the help of his brother at the Pesmen-Rubin Art Studio. It was here that he met Ubbe Eert Iwwerks (or Ub Iwerks as he was more commonly known), a fellow cartoonist who would play a key role in Disney's career. His next stint, at the Kansas City Film Ad Company, saw him move on to commercials while he experimented with a camera. It wasn't long before Disney decided to go on his own. He opened an animation business and initially screened cartoons called Laugh-O-Grams at the Kansas City Theater. These were so popular that he was soon able to start his own studio, adding short fairy tales to the mix. Unfortunately, debt built up and Disney Studio declared bankruptcy in 1923. This setback, however, proved to be the start of good things. Disney moved to Hollywood with \$40 and joined forces with his brother Roy (who invested \$250) and Iwerks. They secured a \$500 loan, constructed a camera stand and began producing at the back of a Hollywood real estate office. Disney Brothers' Cartoon Studio (later changed to Walt Disney Studios) was open for business.

**“I only hope that we never lose sight of one thing - that it was all started by a mouse.”**

In the late 1920s the now world-famous Mickey Mouse hit the cartoon scene. With Iwerks behind his visual character and Disney as the voice, Mickey made his debut in an animated short called Steamboat Willie at the Colony Theater in New York on 18th November 1928. With sound having just made its way into film, the cartoon was an instant hit. From there several industry firsts followed:

Flowers and Trees (1932), was the first cartoon to be produced in colour and to win an Oscar, the first of Disney's 32 personal Academy Awards.

The Three Little Pigs and its title song Who's Afraid of the Big Bad Wolf? (1933) became a theme for the country during the Great Depression.

Silly Symphonies (1929) featured Mickey's friends for the first time - Minnie Mouse, Donald Duck, Goofy and Pluto. Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs, which premiered in Los Angeles in December 1937, was the first full-length animated film. The production cost \$1.499 million – a huge amount considering this was during the Great Depression - and won eight Oscars. A string of full-length animated films followed over the next five years, including Pinocchio, Fantasia, Dumbo and Bambi.

The feature film The Three Caballeros (1945) was the first to combine live action with cartoon. A total of 81 features were released by the studio during Disney's lifetime.

He was among the first to present full-colour television programming with Wonderful World of Color (1961).

**“It's kind of fun to do the impossible.”**

In December 1939, the new Walt Disney Animation Studios campus was opened in Burbank. Despite the challenges and setbacks over the years – not to mention a world war – Disney's team grew to over 1 000 artists, animators, writers and technicians. During WW2, over 90% of the Disney facilities were used to produce health, training and propaganda films for the armed services, with the balance of the team producing comedy shorts.

Disney was never short of vision and his projects simply got bigger. In July 1955, the \$17 million Disneyland theme park, the only theme park designed and completed under his direct supervision, opened at the Disneyland Resort in Anaheim, California. Within four decades, it had entertained over 400 million people. Disney then threw his energies into planning a whole new urban community. He bought an enormous tract of land in central Florida – twice the size of Manhattan Island – which was to become the home of a new entertainment park and his Experimental Prototype Community of Tomorrow (EPCOT), an idea for an urban city centre with a mass transportation system to connect the community's residential and industrial areas. While the original EPCOT concept was abandoned after Disney's death, seven years later in 1971 Walt Disney World opened to the public. The Epcot Center and its two sections - Future World and World Showcase – opened in October 1982. Renamed just Epcot in 1994, it attracted almost 12.5 million visitors in 2019.

**“If I can help provide a place to develop the talent of the future, I think I will have accomplished something.”**

Not long before his death, Walt Disney looked to establish an educational institute that would serve as an umbrella school for college-level performing and creative arts and in 1961 the California Institute of the Arts (CalArts) was established. When Walt Disney moved to greener pastures on 15 December 1966 at the age of 65 from complications of lung cancer, he left a magical legacy. His will always be remembered for his ability to turn wonder into wisdom and his motto of 'dream, believe, dare, do' lives on. As he once said, “We don't look backwards for very long. We keep moving forward, opening up new doors and doing new things, because we're curious... and curiosity keeps leading us down new paths.”